



The Frontline Supervisor

*Helping You Manage Your Company's
Most Valuable Resource - Employees*

January 2001

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- ◆ I think some supervisors make their employees' performance problems worse. Many supervisors learn "on the job." Some with problematic styles fail to salvage good employees. What can supervisors do to learn faster and salvage more employees quicker?

Many supervisors have not been well prepared for their roles. Trial and error combined with ability, a seminar or two, and perhaps some luck produce most good supervisors. Efficient supervision steps practiced early could salvage more employees. To increase the likelihood of salvaging a poor performer rather than making a situation worse: 1) provide enough job orientation and instruction; 2) hold corrective interviews and follow up; 3) issue a written memo with a clear list of the performance issues; 4) show a reasonable amount of patience and support for the employee; 5) be empathetic during the corrective process; 6) have a personal belief in your ability to help others develop; and 7) refer early to the EAP when a pattern of performance problems develops.

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- ◆ I am a newly hired manager overseeing a large group of employees. In many ways, I am the opposite of the last supervisor, but we both have good reputations. What must I do in order to help employees adapt to my style?

Being consistent and predictable are the most important skills you will need to practice as a new manager. When leadership changes, employees pass through an adaptive period where they must learn the style and expectations of the new supervisor. Although you will need to be sensitive to the work culture, you were not hired to mimic the style of the last manager. Ultimately, employees will have to adapt to your style. Helping them be successful will depend on your ability to define your style early and communicate your expectations. You must then practice consistency and predictability to shorten the adaptation period. Some employees may be unable to change or meet your expectations. As a result, conflicts may emerge. You should examine these conflicts for new lessons or improvements you can make in how you manage people. The EAP can assist you. Ultimately, some employees may depart, but a supervisor being open to any effective changes can usually reduce the number of departures.

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- ◆ Our team members have such strong personalities that they stay in almost constant conflict. Our team meetings focus on practical matters, but we avoid topics that could lead to flaring emotions. How can we begin this type of work?

Remember that team conflict is normal and must be managed not eliminated. Without a structure for managing conflict, you ultimately risk uncivil behavior between employees. This will bring about an adverse response from management. Try the following: Divide your team meeting into two parts. Part one should focus on practical matters of teamwork. The second half should focus on: 1) coworker/management communication issues that are interfering with the team; 2) role expectations and conflicts interfering with the team; and 3) other organizational issues interfering with the team. Such a meeting may include fireworks in the beginning, and you may need extra time. Seek solutions. Eventually, the intensity and frequency of conflict will subside. Get everyone to agree on three rules. Rule # 1: Engage management to hold the team accountable for effective relationships. Rule #2: Keep conflict in the group. No venting or seeking validation outside the team. Rule #3: Start each meeting with a short discussion about what's working well.

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- ◆ We had a company party during the holiday season that included some highly disruptive behavior from three employees. The party was not on company time, nor was it on company property. Can I refer the employees to the EAP?

Your organization is responsible for the party and its outcome, so it is a business affair, not an event without workplace implications. A corrective response is therefore appropriate and so is a supervisor referral to the EAP. The same guidance would apply to an off-site trade show or business conference. These events are different from social events sponsored by private persons, such as an employee wedding reception or a holiday party at someone's home. Of course, the most important intervention to reduce acute problems at business parties is to control the use of alcohol or eliminate it entirely. Consider communicating the type of behavior expected at company functions. Some employees may need to hear it. It is unlikely that such a message will dampen employee's spirits at the party or social function.

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- ◆ I am thinking about terminating my employee. I know she is an EAP client because she has mentioned it several times over the past year. I never made a supervisor referral. Is there any point?

You should make a supervisor referral to the EAP and base it on ongoing performance problems. Provide a written account of the performance problems to your employee and go over the list with her prior to the referral. Supply the same list to the EAP. Your employee may tell you again that she is working with the EAP, or question the need for the referral. Your supervisor referral, however, is a completely different matter from her self-referral. Frequently, EA professionals are able to help employees more effectively with documentation that supports a better examination of the true nature of the employee's problems. Such information typically assists the EAP in taking a new approach or a new look at the employee's problems.

Notes:

This information is intended only for the employees of your company. Please do not post it on a website that is accessible by the general public or by your company's clients.

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